



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 1 (B)

Temptation, Wild Beasts, and Angels

[RCL] Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

As a church, we find ourselves in the Lenten wilderness for another year.

We understand the concept of *wilderness*. Literally speaking, even those of us who are non-hikers can imagine life on something like the Appalachian Trail or some other long trail. Many of us know someone who's done a long hike like that, staying in the literal wilderness for days or weeks.

We understand metaphorical wilderness, too. All of us have a time in our lives when we have felt ourselves searching and lost. Any number of things can land you there: the illness or death of a loved one. An illness or injury to your own body. A vocational crisis. A financial crisis. A broken relationship. A general sense of dread from what you see on the news. Any combination of these factors and countless more can land a person in the wilderness.

We know the many feelings of the wilderness, too: sadness and depression, anger and bitterness, relief and gratitude.

We know what it's like to find ourselves in this kind of wilderness. Maybe you're plunged into the wilderness of loneliness and confusion suddenly when you hear the bad news — that she's sick or that you're sick or that he died or that they want a divorce. Or maybe it happens more gradually, as you slowly find yourself sliding into a general confusion about your life and your identity and what's happening in the world.

It doesn't matter how you get to the wilderness, but it's rarely by choice.

In today's Gospel story, we get a re-run of Jesus' baptism before we're told that the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness.

Jesus didn't get there gently. While Matthew and Luke phrase it something like “was led” by the Spirit into the wilderness, Mark is much more forceful in his description. He says that the Spirit *drove* Jesus into the

wilderness — using the same Greek word that Matthew, Mark, *and* Luke use to talk about Jesus driving out demons.

So, Jesus, like many of us, is driven into the wilderness, and there he meets three things: temptation, wild beasts, and angels. And so today, we'll talk about the wilderness in three parts, using the experience of Appalachian Trail hikers to help us along.

Chapter One: Temptation

Because Mark's Gospel is often scant on details, we don't know anything from him about what Jesus' temptation was supposed to be like. As for us, though, we usually think about temptation in pretty petty terms, really: temptation to do bad things.

It would seem, however, that the biggest temptation that grabs all of us is hopelessness. That this will never be okay, that we have failed, that we are tired and can't go on.

Hopelessness. Trail hikers get it in the literal wilderness, and everyone gets it in the figurative wilderness.

These days, the temptation for most of us is to give up and resign ourselves to the way things are. The nation is polarized and the world is war-torn and we often seem unable to solve anything. Many of us feel resigned to living in an entirely different political reality than those that we love.

When you hit the temptation-to-hopelessness phase, you know for sure that you've found the wilderness.

Chapter Two: Wild Beasts

Mark tells us simply that Jesus was "with the wild beasts."

Animals aren't for everyone, but those of us who love and appreciate the presence of animals know that their noticing us can lift our day. The internet cartoon called "The Awkward Yeti" is often a discussion between parts of the body. For example, the brain is analytical, the tongue is demanding, the gut is ornery and embarrasses everyone all the time, and the heart is whimsical and impulsive.

One particular cartoon goes like this: Panel one: the heart is walking alone and sad. Panel two: A cartoon dog walks up to the sad heart and wags its tail. Panel three: The heart walks up to the dog and pats the dog on the head. Panel four: The heart bounds away smiling. Pets, whether our own or someone else's, have a way of lifting our hearts.

But the "wild beasts" can be just that — wild. They can come to you in the form of wild geese over your head or the hawks floating around the mountains or a rabbit or a deer that you see in your yard. This is the

part where the real wilderness and the metaphorical wilderness are the same. People wouldn't undertake demanding hikes through ugly places, and what often keeps hikers' feet moving is the promise of beauty — beautiful creatures and beautiful views.

In the same way, part of what can make the metaphorical wilderness okay is the chance to enjoy the real wilderness, even if it's just the beauty of the snow or the sunlight or the birds outside your window.

St. John of the Cross knew a wilderness of his own, and he wrote this poem:

*"I was sad one day and went for a walk; I sat in a field.
A rabbit noticed my condition and came near.
It often does not take more than that to help at times —
to just be close to creatures who are so full of knowing,
so full of love that they don't chat.
They just gaze with their marvelous understanding."*

Final Chapter: Angels

In the wilderness, Jesus also meets some angels, whom we are told "waited on him." Unlike Matthew, Mark doesn't tell us that the angels show up at the end. In Mark, it seems that the temptation *and* the wild beasts *and* the angels are with Jesus at different points all along his journey.

On the Appalachian Trail, there's a whole other culture with its own set of terminology. "Trail magic" is an unexpected thing that lifts a hiker's spirits. "Trail angels" are people who make trail magic happen, whether giving a ride into town or a hot shower or a hot meal. At its heart, a trail angel doesn't spend all their time in the wilderness but takes time and effort to help someone who is.

When you're in a period of metaphorical wilderness yourself, there are plenty of trail angels along the way. They're the ones who give you a meal or a smile or a helping hand when you need it most. They can't take you out of the wilderness, but they can help you endure it.

The next time you find yourself in the wilderness, look for and give thanks for the trail angels along the way, be they family, friends, or strangers.

While you're at it, this Lent, consider how *you* can be a trail angel. Consider who you know in any kind of wilderness right now, and consider whether you're in a position to help. Everyone can be a trail angel to someone.

Epilogue

The Lenten journey isn't only about pious observance. Lent is most useful when it helps us understand something about our lives outside of church.

May you find food for the journey here, because the bread we break is God, the one driven into the wilderness before us, teaching us to withstand the temptation to abandon it all, the one who was with the wild beasts and created the beauty of the wilderness we see, and the one who met and sends us angels along the way. We don't usually go into the wilderness by choice, but the Good News is that we also do not go into the wilderness alone.

When hikers reach the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail at the summit of Mt. Katahdin, they are greeted with a plaque with these Ash Wednesday-appropriate words: "Man is born to die. His works are short lived. Buildings crumble, monuments decay, wealth vanishes but Katahdin in all its glory forever shall remain the mountain of the people of Maine."

Ash Wednesday reminded us that we came from dust and will return there. All of our journeys in the wilderness will not save us, but they can teach us. And sometimes, when we're lucky, we find the end and a stunning view and a glimpse of a loving God who shall stand far longer even than Katahdin, and we will feel small, humble... and fulfilled.

So let us journey this Lent — together. **Amen.**

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